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A Voluntary Simplicity Lifestyle: Values, Adoption, Practices and Effects

Jessica Osikominu [1] and Nancy Bocken [2,*]

[1] University of Cambridge, Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, 1 Trumpington St, Cambridge CB2 1QA, UK; jessica@osikominu.de

[2] The International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics (IIIEE), Lund University, P O Box 196, SE-221 00 Lund, Sweden

* Correspondence: Nancy.Bocken@iiiee.lu.se; Tel.: +46-46-222-00-00

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Abstract: Adopting a voluntary simplicity lifestyle (VSL) contributes to a change in consumption patterns towards more sustainable ones, which is urgently needed. This study defines the VSL as a voluntary reduction of income and consumption in exchange for more free time. Our research aims to contribute with more detailed VSL criteria. A literature review develops initial VSL criteria, which are validated against and enriched by data gathered through in-depth interviews with nine voluntary simplicity practitioners. This study contributes with: (1) more detailed insights into the value changes during lifestyle adoption of a VSL, (2) a detailed perspective on significant aspects in VSL adoption as well as how they tend to happen in sequence, and (3) insight into how consumption reduces or changes and how free-time is spent when adopting a VSL. A conceptual framework for more detailed VSL criteria, as proposed in this study, is valuable to characterise the VSL lifestyle and differentiate it from other lifestyles. In sum, the study contributes to clearer perspectives on the VSL and provides detailed VSL criteria. Finally, we reaffirm the potential of VSL to contribute toward changing dominant unsustainable consumption patterns and indicate directions for future research.

Keywords: voluntary simplicity lifestyle; simple living; sustainable lifestyles; sustainable consumption; sustainable practices; intrinsic values; behavioural change; Schwartz model of universal human values

1. Introduction

Living simpler, less materialistic lives is good for people and needed for the planet [1]. One way of living less materialistically is the adoption of the voluntary simplicity lifestyle (VSL) with its values, practices, and resulting positive effects [2]. Changing one's lifestyle to a VSL leads to voluntary adoption of more sustainable consumption, which is urgently needed because humans today live beyond planet Earth's regenerative capacity [3]. Research highlights the post-1950s acceleration in global resource use and negative impacts on the climate and ecosystems associated with this [4,5]. Living within Earth's capacity is the required basis of social and economic progress [6], but today's consumption patterns prevent such progress and, as a consequence, cause not only ecological damage (evident through depleting natural resources, climate change, biodiversity losses or land degradation among others [7]), but also have negative social implications (evident through increasing inequality [8] and reduced wellbeing [9,10]).

Reaching sustainable consumption, however, creates an enormous challenge due to today's structure of the global economic system, which currently depends on at least 2% growth to remain stable [6]. Such constant growth is primarily due to consumption, as 60% of global GDP, or $35 trillion

annually, is related to consumer spending [11]. The need to change such growth (and hence consumption as its primary contributor) in our limited Earth system is "the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about" [12] (p. 5) or is even aware of. Thus, it is no surprise that the "social and political consensus that consumption is an essential activity and a worthy goal" [3] (p. 287) remains. On top of that, exponential population growth [13,14] accelerates the urgency for change.

Consumerist cultures in Western societies further prohibit reaching sustainable consumption patterns. They take consumption as a right and sign of wellbeing [3]. However, the opposite is true: A materialistic lifestyle reduces wellbeing [9,15,16]. Thus, we could all live better by consuming less while reducing our environmental impact [17–19]. Half of the global consumption takes place in OECD countries, where it effects "lifestyle consumption emissions" [20] (p. 4). As a consequence, a change of consumption patterns through lifestyle changes of those who consume the most is a strong lever and, in fact, the most immediate way to reduce the adverse environmental effects of human activity [21]. What offers hope is that some people in such Western, affluent societies act and voluntarily change their lifestyles towards more sustainable and satisfying ways of living [2,10,22]. The VSL, therefore, prospects a promising solution to the global consumption challenge. This research explores the VSL within the scientific literature and from the perspective of those who identify themselves living one, namely voluntary simplicity practitioners (VSPs).

2. Voluntary Simplicity Lifestyle

This section introduces the voluntary simplicity lifestyle (VSL) in more detail. It first sheds light on the lifestyle's definitions, facts and origins. Second, it introduces an initial conceptual framework for more detailed VSL criteria, which this study aims to propose.

2.1. What Is Known about VSL

The VSL is defined as "an oppositional living strategy that rejects the high-consumption, materialistic lifestyles of consumer cultures" [23] (p. 2) and involves a conscious shift towards intrinsically satisfying pursuits [2,24]. To successfully pursue such a conscious shift, VSPs aim to provide for material needs as simply and directly as possible, minimising expenditure on consumer goods and services, and directing more time and energy towards pursuing non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning [25,26]. In real life, this often means accepting a lower income and a lower level of consumption in exchange for more free time, which is also the general VSL criterion agreed upon by many researchers [19,23,24,27–29]. Attempts by researchers to segment or determine the VSL in more detail did not generate a consensus within the academic debate yet. Existing research either lacks strong underpinning data [30] (as in e.g., [28,31]) or diverges from the general VSL criterion (as in e.g., [32–34]). Further, the terms "downshifting" or "the simple life"[35] are often used interchangeably for the VSL [23]. Individuals who adopt a VSL primarily live in Western societies, have met their basic needs and are often well educated [23,28]. Other similar sustainable lifestyles relate to 'Eco-villages' or 'Transition Towns', which are characterized by practitioners moving to a different place of living, in contrast to VSL [1,36,37]. Sustainable consumer segments which relate to the VSL concept, include, for example, "mindful consumers" [38], "frugal consumers" [39] or "Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability" [40,41]. The same holds true for terms that are often used in the societal lifestyle debate such as minimalism, slow consumption (e.g., food, fashion), zero-waste living, sharing, swapping. Yet, we argue that the VSL is worthy of closer examination, precisely because of its focus on rejecting high-consumption and materialistic lifestyles of dominant consumer cultures, which may be a necessary counter-movement to start breaking down dominant unsustainable lifestyles.

Overall, research [42] about VSL is still limited. Most studies were conducted in the USA (e.g., [2,25,28,29,33,43–45]) followed by emerging studies in the UK (e.g., [46–48]). VSL researchers further stem from a variety of fields including sociology, psychology, and marketing [45].

The philosophy of voluntary simplicity can be traced back to the world's religions and philosophies [2] and later in the 19th century to the Thoreauvian ideals of sufficiency and simplicity [49,50]. The term "voluntary simplicity" was determined by Mahatma Gandhi's student Gregg in

1936, who defined it as "avoidance of exterior clutter" [2] (pp. 91–92) as possessions are irrelevant for the deliberate organisation of life for a purpose. It later gained popularity mainly in the USA through Elgin's book [2] that defined it as a way of life that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich [28,49,51,52]. Since then, a range of definitions was proposed, and the meaning of VSL developed from spiritual and religious tenets towards an alternative to today's stressful, consumption-driven and time-impoverished ways of living [22,48,53].

2.2. Towards Aspects for the Missing, Detailed VSL Criteria

Beyond the consensus that the general VSL criterion includes a voluntary reduction of income and consumption in exchange for more free-time [19,23,24,27–29], a lack of clarity about which more particular criteria defines the VSL exists [19,48,54]. In other words, the VSL does not yet have a " commonly agreed-upon ''diagnostic criteria'' which sets this lifestyle apart from those of mainstream North American society" [19] (p. 356) or similar Western societies. The objective of this study is, therefore, to propose such missing, more detailed VSL criteria. To do so, we chose four aspects-values, adoption, practices, and their effects—as suitable to fulfil our set research objective. Figure 1 illustrates an initial conceptual framework for the missing detailed VSL criteria. It also demonstrates how the chosen four aspects are interrelated. We will use the same conceptual framework again to demonstrate our results at the end of this study.

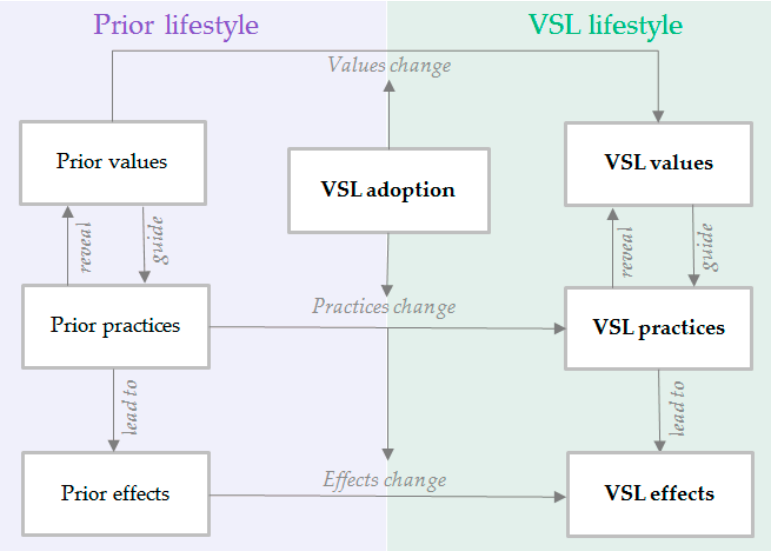

Figure 1. Initial conceptual framework for detailed voluntary simplicity lifestyle (VSL) criteria. Sources: based on [2,19,57–60,27–29,32,45,54–56].

The initial conceptual framework was built based on existing literature and demonstrates how the four VSL aspects (highlighted in bold in Figure 1) interrelate: During VSL adoption, both values and practices change. Due to the practice change, effects change as well [2,27–29,55–59]. How each of the four VSL aspects interrelates with prior lifestyle aspects is explained in more detail in the following. In sum, this gives evidence why all four qualify each and, second, in their combination for being part of our proposed detailed VSL criteria:

- VSL values: Values guide practices and serve as standards for what one perceives as right or wrong. In turn, this means that practices reveal values [28,58]. Within Figure 1, this holds for two interrelationships: VSL values and VSL practices and, second, the prior values and the prior practices. Literature further states that a shift in values happens when the VSL is adopted [2,27,29,59].
- VSL practices: A lifestyle is the assemblage of practices that give substance to the ongoing narrative, self-identity, and self-actualisation [55,56]. In other words, a unique set of practices

determines one's lifestyle [56,57]. Therefore, determining concrete VSL practices as well as the change of practices compared to the prior lifestyle is both essential to pinpoint the VSL [27,28,32,54].

- VSL effects: Each practice has an effect [58], and from a sustainability point of view, effects can be positive for people and planet or negative. Again, within our initial conceptual framework (Figure 1), the relationship of practices and effects is illustrated for the prior practices leading to prior effects as well as for the VSL practices leading to the VSL effects [2,19,28,60].
- VSL adoption: The VSL adoption is the process that creates the change from the prior lifestyle to the VSL lifestyle. In more concrete, it collates the diversity of aspects which enable or hinder the change of one's way of living [2,27,29,45,60].

The results (Section 4) will describe each of the four aspects – values, adoption, practices, and effects—in detail and will also provide further knowledge on each aspect from existing literature. We will then consolidate all significant aspects into the initial conceptual framework of Figure 1 resulting in the final conceptual framework for detailed VSL criteria, which this study proposes. In doing so we will address the identified research gap. The research method is discussed next.

3. Method

First, the existing literature was reviewed, and initial results were developed. Then, primary data through interviews was collected. From both, we developed the final results: four final VSL values, two final models and derived from all the final conceptual framework with detailed VSL criteria. The whole process is depicted below and described in more detail in the following, referring to Steps 1 to 5 outlined in Figure 2. For illustrative purposes, Figure 2 includes tables and figures developed in this study and where the frameworks can be found in the paper.

Step 1: The research gap of missing detailed VSL criteria [19] guided the literature review and led to the development of the initial conceptual framework (Figure 1) for such missing detailed VSL criteria. Academic literature on VSL was reviewed and examined against the agreed-up general VSL criterion (less income and consumption; more free-time [19,23,24,27–29]). We excluded literature in contradiction (e.g., [35,41,50]) to the agreed-upon general VSL criterion to not further add to the already existing confusion about what signifies the VSL.

Step 2: To determine VSL values, the literature was reviewed, with limited results. Therefore, the acknowledged Schwartz Model of Universal Human Values (referred to as Schwartz Model hereafter), was used in addition to existing VSL literature as a tool [61]. We chose the Schwartz Model as it has significantly advanced previous values theories, enables a systematic study of relationships between the full spectrum of human values and practices, is widely used among psychologist and has been empirically validated in at least 65 countries [62,63].

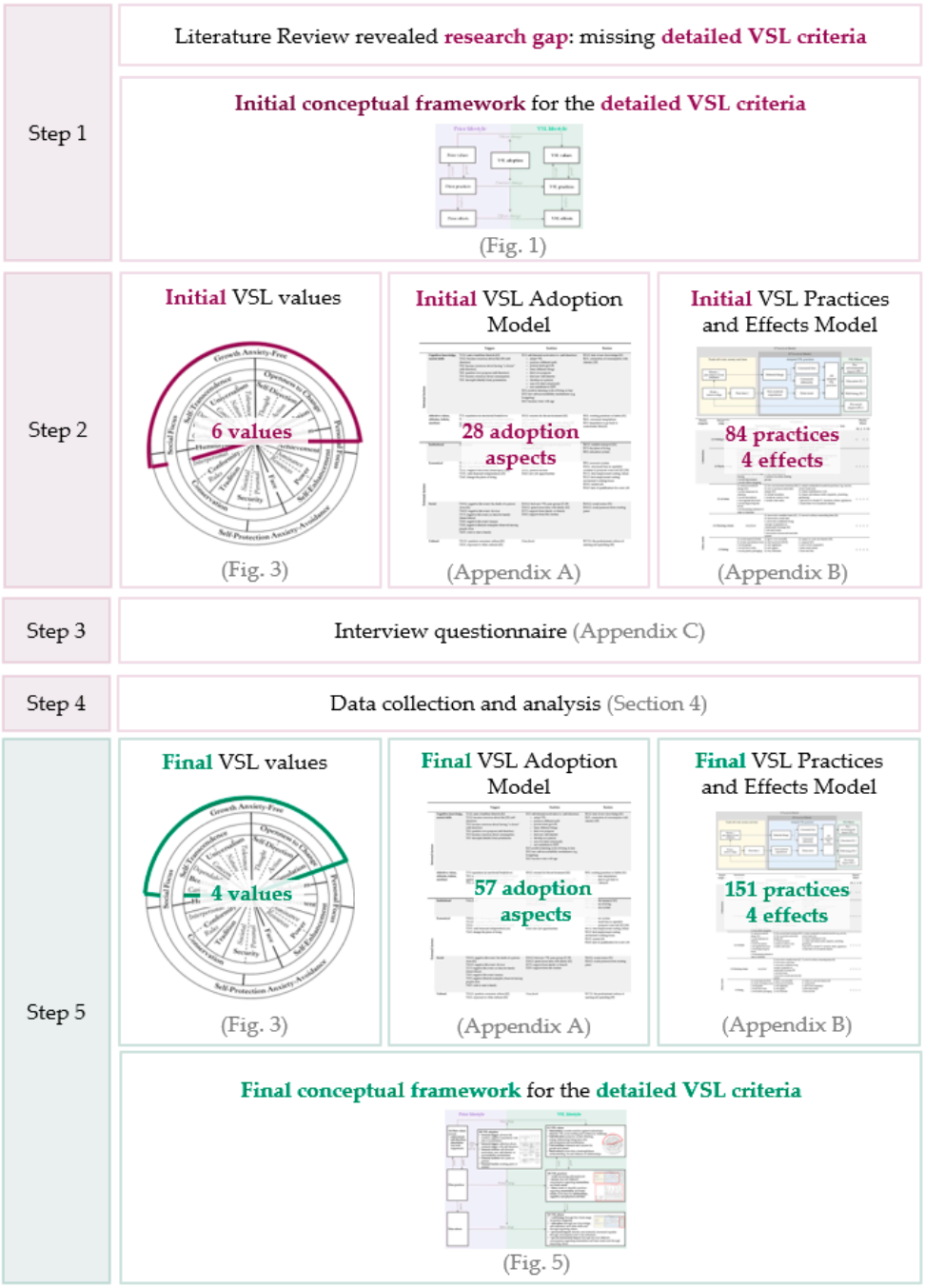

Figure 2. Research process.

First, all Schwartz values were compared to existing VSL literature with six initial VSL values as a result (which will be explained in detail in Section 4.1).

Second, to determine aspects influencing VSL adoption, again, no models were found to serve as a starting point. Hence, we reviewed behavioural change models [57,64–67] and chose the Kollmuss and Agyeman model [67] for inspiration. The model builds on influencing factors on pro-environmental behaviour from various well-established behavioural change models. Further, the model's differentiation and categorisation of internal and external factors as well as enabling and hindering factors towards new behavioural practices appeared to be the most suitable structure to adapt for the initial VSL Adoption Model. The initial and final VSL adoption model are found in Appendix A.

Finally, the aim was to determine VSL practices and their effects. Existing literature was diverse, and again a model as a potential starting point was missing from VSL or other sustainable lifestyles' literature [1,36,37]. Therefore, the initial VSL Practices and Effects Model was developed from solely the patterns perceived in existing VSL literature. The initial and final VSL practices and effects model is found in Appendix B.

The literature review until this point was employed to understand previous relevant and adjacent research and develop initial results from this: the initial conceptual framework for the missing VSL criteria, initial VSL values, and initial models for VSL adoption, and practices and effects.

Step 3: The initial results guided the development of a semi-structured questionnaire which can be found in Appendix C. Using the method of interviews was inspired by a similar research study on sustainable lifestyles [56]. Also, semi-structured interviews allow for an in-depth conversation where the respondents can expound and branch out on their thoughts [68]. Participants were recruited using a purposive and theoretical sampling strategy [69], which was deemed appropriate for a self-selecting set of respondents. For this purpose, an advertisement, with details on the research, was developed and placed in different groups of the broadest-reaching social platform Facebook. The criteria for self-selection for participants and therefore also our sampling criteria were set as the general VSL criterion and a potential change of life priorities.

Step 4: We decided to limit the data sample to 11 interviews as analysis showed that theoretical saturation was reached already [70]. The interviews were conducted via Skype, lasted 54 min on average and were recorded after having received permission. Data was checked against the sampling criteria after collection and two interview partners were excluded from further analysis. After a validity check, the final set of nine interviews were transcribed and coded (using the software NVivo 12) against aspects found within existing literature as well as new ones. Appendix D shows the list of interviewees, each having a unique identifier, e.g., P1, which we will use in the rest of the study.

Step 5: In the last step, the initial findings from the literature were enriched based on insights generated from the interviews through a comparison of secondary and primary data. This led to the final results for all four investigated aspects (values, adoption, practices, effects). Also, the most significant findings across all investigated aspects became part of the proposed final conceptual framework for more detailed VSL criteria. The following section describes all results in detail.

4. Results

This section outlines the results found among the four aspects investigated. We will first show our results for VSL values (Section 4.1.), continue with the VSL adoption (4.2.), followed with VSL practices (4.3.) and close the section with the VSL effects (4.4.). We will also indicate the many interrelations between those four aspects, which we have partly already indicated in our initial conceptual framework (Figure 1).

4.1. VSL Values

Existing literature states that personal values are constructs to describe individual persons [71] or, in other words, describe what one perceives as important in life. With regards to the VSL values, little knowledge exists [2]. While some researchers tried to define VSL values [52,54], only psychologist Kasser [10] researched them so far with sound methods from psychology. He found that VSPs are guided by intrinsic values [10]. Beyond this, not much is known about VSL values. To pinpoint in more concrete which values guide VSPs, we used the Schwartz Model [58] which includes twelve values clustered into four groups. Adjacent values are compatible: as the distance between two value around the circle increases, they become less compatible [61]. Further, the values have different effects: Some values, including the ones guiding VSPs (marked in green in Figure 3) lead to personal growth, no anxiety, intrinsic motivation, pro-environmental and pro-social behaviour while opposing values do the opposite.

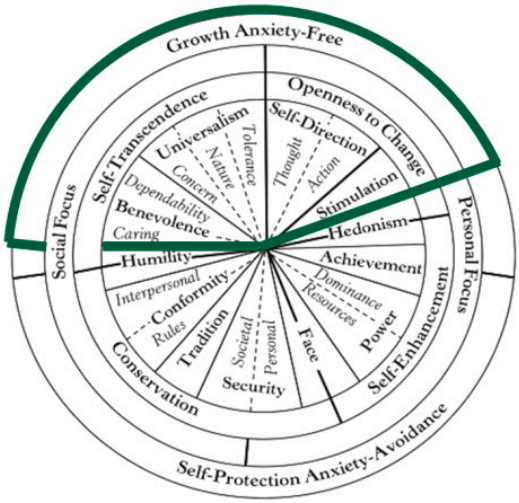

Figure 3. The Schwartz Model of Universal Human Values. Source: [72] (p. 669; final VSL values highlighted by the authors).

To develop new insights into VSL values, we compared the Schwartz Model with existing VSL knowledge in Table 1 [2,10,19,28]. Kasser [10] found that VSPs tend to satisfy psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, resulting in higher levels in wellbeing. The comparison shows a match between those VSL psychological needs and the Schwartz values 'self-direction' and 'benevolence' (Table 1, column 2). Second, it shows a match between all effects of six Schwartz values [73] (column 3) with the effects of living a VSL (column 4). It is therefore likely that the values 'self-direction' and 'benevolence' guide VSPs and beyond that, perhaps some of the other four Schwartz values in column 1. In sum, the six values represent our determined initial VSL values (column 1).

Table 1. Comparison of existing VSL knowledge with Schwartz Model. Sources: based on [2,10,19,28].

	1	2	3	4
Schwartz Value Group	**Schwartz Values and Initial VSL Values**	**Existing Knowledge about VSL Psychological Needs**	**Effects of All Six Schwartz Values** [73]	**Correlating VSL Effects**
Openness to change (personal values)	Hedonism		1. Intrinsic motivation 2. Anxiety-free 3. Self-expansion and growth 4. Pro-environmental and pro-social practices	1. Intrinsic values [10] 2. Wellbeing ↑ [19] 3. Education ↑ [2] 4. Pro-environmental and pro-social impact ↑ [2,28]
	Stimulation			
	Self-direction	Competence, Autonomy [10]		
Self-transcendence (societal values)	Universalism			
	Benevolence	Relatedness [10]		
	Humility			

The coding of the conducted interviews against all potential values of the Schwartz Model confirmed four values ('stimulation', 'self-direction', 'universalism', 'benevolence') out of the initially presumed VSL values. For the two adjacent values —'hedonism' and 'humility' — no evidence was found through the interviews. The resulting four proposed final VSL values are compatible and not in conflict (see Figure 3). We explain each of the four final VSL values with noteworthy examples from interviews in the following sections.

4.1.1. Universalism

The VSL value 'universalism' indicates "understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and nature"[61] (p. 112). Hence, if 'universalism' is a value guiding someone's behaviour, then the global social and environmental challenges are of concern. Further, the value only manifests once people become aware of society beyond their own in-group and

recognise that their own and their group's survival depends upon the collective use of scarce natural resources [14,58]. Thus, a failure to accept and care for other humans and to collectively protect the natural environment on which all depend may lead to disputes which would threaten their own evolutionary survival need [58]. Interviewees hence must have had such moments of awareness, and some had them presumably through their studies or work.

Interviewees revealed that the value guides them in several ways. First, they accept and understand people different from themselves by "being open to people and being genuine" (P3) or "try not to judge people because everybody is looking at things from a different perspective" (P1). Further, they commit to equality, justice, and protection of all humans, as they avoided harming anyone else through their practices, such as their purchasing practices. Similarly, many interviewees showed a deep awareness about the ecological crisis and their ecological impact. Some mentioned their spiritual connection to nature, noting other people got "so detached" (P3) or explaining: "my physical relationship with nature […] has changed a lot and for good" (P6).

4.1.2. Benevolence

The VSL value 'Benevolence' is the "preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact" [61] (p. 112). Benevolence was evident as interviewees dedicated more time to their relationships with family, friends, and community. Some talked about having more meaningful relationships, spending more quality time, understanding their family and friends better or being able to rely more on them. For example, one respondent explained being keen on "spending quality time with people I really want to be with" (P3).

4.1.3. Stimulation

'Stimulation' indicates "excitement, novelty and challenge in life" [61] (p. 112) is important to a person. This VSL value was evident as several interviewees perceived the dominance of lifestyles focused on working and spending [15,16,51,74] as unfavourable. One VSL practitioner explained: "I feel very frustrated […] by the narrative […]: you go to school, you finish your degree, you get into a job, and you continue to be in that job until you eventually die. And you want money to just shop […] there needs to be a big change […] because nobody is feeling satisfied" (P5). Against the norms, living a VSL was therefore perceived as a challenge or a counter-reaction. Also, living a VSL was in itself perceived as a positive, ongoing challenge: "The momentum keeps going […] it's a continuous thing, you're always trying to move little steps forward all the time […] It's interesting to see how much you can do for yourself" (P1). Staying focused on the constant VSL challenge and not going back on the "easy road" (P2) (mainstream lifestyle) also required the last value: 'self-direction'.

4.1.4. Self-direction

'Self-direction' is about a life full of "independent thought and action, choosing, creating, and exploring" [61] (p. 112). Compared to the other three VSL values, this one was present most strongly.

First, many interviewees had determined their purpose (e.g., building on community connections and resilience, finding a balance between impact and wellbeing or contributing to system change to save humanity). Also, some said they always ask themselves 'why' they do what they do in everyday practices and reflect regularly. Second, some practitioners expressed to have a good understanding of the systemic complexity of the economic and societal challenges. In other words, they think in 'systems'. One interviewee explained, not being the "one or two-dimensional person anymore" (P2). Interviewees also created their own systems for regular household activities: They automated and simplified to allow for more "time toward non-materialistic pursuits" [18] (p. 5). Not focusing time and energy on material things was prominent in interviewees' responses, and echoes earlier research [28,75,76]. Also, respondents explained they only consume what they need and regard their current possessions as sufficient to maintain a simple good life: "early on we discovered the magic simple little equation about not needing to earn much to do what we actually enjoyed."

(P2). Despite their reduced incomes, some interviewees regarded themselves as richer than before and had redefined what the word poor means for them, mentioning they used to be "time poor" (P2).

4.1.5. The Remaining Values

Beyond the above four final VSL values, we found evidence for two other values. First, some interviewees perceived the value 'power' which focuses on "social status and prestige, control, or dominance over people and resources" [61] (p. 112) negatively. This comes as no surprise as power is a materialistic and extrinsic value which is in conflict to the VSL values 'benevolence' and 'universalism'. Second, interviewees stated that they are not guided by the value 'achievement' anymore, which reflects the importance of "personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards" [61] (p. 112). This was our only and rather weak evidence found for a value shift [2,27,29,59] or an even profound value transformation [29] claimed by scholars. In addition, our findings suggest that 'self-direction' and 'stimulation' have been suppressed prior to VSL adoption. Schwartz questions a fundamental claimed value shift as well, stating on VSPs: "I would expect the group you are studying to differ in predictable ways from a control of the general public. However, much of that difference was probably present prior to their lifestyle change" [77].

To conclude, four values from the Schwartz Model clearly guide VSPs in their practices and therefore determine the final VSL values. Moreover, we found only weak indications for a value transformation. Instead, our study shows that two values were initially suppressed, as the next section will show in detail. Such striking findings will become part of the final conceptual framework for detailed VSL criteria in Section 5 of this research.

4.2. VSL Adoption

Existing literature states [2,27,29,60] that the VSL adoption is the process during which individuals adopt the new vs. lifestyle and therefore stop their prior lifestyle (Figure 1). It is a "slow, evolutionary process involving trial and error" [45] (p. 533) and one that is profound and complex [2,27,29,60]. One way of adopting a VSL does not exist [2]. Instead, a diverse range of aspects influences the adoption of a VSL exists. To develop new knowledge about the VSL adoption process, we collated aspects from existing literature and then developed the initial VSL Adoption Model with the 28 adoption aspects found (Figure 2). Adoption aspects either influence VSL adoption positively (triggers, enablers) or negatively (barriers). We define triggers as those aspects that initiate adoption or spark the initial moment of changing lifestyles. Enablers make adoption easier or ensure people stay on the path of adopting the VSL. Barriers hinder VSL adoption and need to be overcome. Further, adoption aspects are attributed either to the individual's cognitive or affective part of the psyche or to their external context, namely aspects stemming from institutions, economy, society or culture. In a second step, we coded our interviews against the already determined adoption aspects from literature and against newly emerging ones. As a result, the final VSL Adoption Model developed and it completed the initial VSL Adoption Model with another 29 determined aspects. In total, 37% of the 57 aspects in the final Adoption Model were found in both literature and interviews, 17% came only from literature, and 46% stemmed from interviews only. Table 2 illustrates the structure of the final VSL Adoption Model. The fully coded version of the final VSL Adoption Model as well as the initial VSL Adoption Model (as an integral part of the final model) is found in Appendix A.

The following sections highlight the significant aspects which will also become part of the final conceptual framework for the missing detailed VSL criteria at a later stage of this study. The following refers to significant triggers (T#), enablers (E#) or barriers (B#) (see also Appendix A).

Table 2. Simplified final VSL Adoption Model. Sources: based on [2,24,74,78,27,29,30,42,46,49,59,67] and interviews.

		Triggers	Enablers	Barriers	Sum
Internal factors	Cognitive: attitudes, knowledge, mental skills	6	4	2	12
	Affective: attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions	3	5	3	11
External factors	Institutional	0	1	3	4
	Economical	5	4	6	15
	Social	6	4	2	12
	Cultural	2	0	1	3
	Sum	22	18	17	

4.2.1. Triggers

Triggers for VSL adoption among interviewees came from the external context. The first significant external trigger was often a significant life event such as the death of a person close, a divorce, having no time for family, or a trauma (T15–19). The second types of triggers related to dissatisfaction, stress, anxiety or lack of time due to their current jobs (T10). Finally, powerful triggers related to negative experiences with materialism (T5–8). After such external triggers happened, a questioning of self-identity, and internal trigger, often followed (T2–4). The following three examples illustrate how VSPs describe those triggers in their own words:

- A work crisis (T1,2,4,10,17): "The transition was brought upon by a crisis where you realise you're living a very unsustainable lifestyle, which also means that your health suffers and there was lots of stress. And I had to stop and step out of that lifestyle. […] I decided to create a new career and new life for myself, which involves […] understanding who I was, what my values were and what skills and knowledge I needed to make the transition." (P2)
- Profound feelings of limited freedom due to possessions (T2,5,6,7,17): "I would cry in the basement, sorting things […] surrounded by useless junk [...] I struggled very much with being angry and unhappy. Once I set the boundaries and said: "no more [...] We don't need anything else." [...] I just felt more in control of my life and much happier." (P4)
- An observation of materialism in others (T8,19,21): "they go to work and [...] don't enjoy what they do, and did it because they want to earn more money, and then they spend it on some material possessions, and those possessions do not result in any long-term wellbeing [...] I'm not inspired by them. I don't want anything like that. (P3)

Interviewees reflected on those life moments guided by 'self-direction'. Such a self-directed perspective was presumably a prerequisite to change and start adopting VSL practices guided by the value of 'stimulation'. Without both values, individuals could arguably have reflected on such life moments differently, which would have let them continue their 'mainstream' lifestyles.

4.2.2. Enablers

Once such triggers sparked the motivation and decision to change the way of living, enabling factors were needed for interviewees to succeed. The most often mentioned external enablers were the partner or new peers (E15–17) who reaffirmed VSL adoption: "You meet lots of wonderful people who think the same way you do and when you first start you think you're on your own, but you're definitely not" (P1).

However, overall, more predominant were internal enablers such as intrinsic motivations (E1), emerging new self-identities (E1,6–8) and accountability mechanisms (E3), all of which were presumably again guided by 'self-direction' and 'stimulation'. One intrinsic motivator was the experience of a positive VSL learning cycle (E2). Others related to inner growth or not pursuing the life expected by others (E1). Many said their intent is to make time and not money (E1). Regarding the latter, the literature confirms that VSPs regard time as more valuable than money, which is why their money, possessions or salary do not determine their worth or identity [27,29]. One example of

a new self-identity is (E1,6): "I redefined myself in a way that I'm getting closer to the person I always wanted to be instead of talking about it" (P2). Finally, intrinsic accountability mechanisms (E3) established by interviewees included disciplined budgeting, consumption tracking and regularly asking oneself or discussing as a family, whether something is a 'need' or a 'want'.

4.2.3. Barriers

Adopting VSL was not "an easy road" (P2), and interviewees perceived multiple barriers. In contrast to the literature, which suggests that barriers come from the psyche through existing practices or habits (B3), consumer temptations (B4) or an individual's identity tied to consumption (B2), interviewees mentioned only a few internal barriers (B1,5). This may be due to the sample focused on those succeeding in VSL adoption. Yet, the most significant barrier included 'existing peers' (B16): "My partner wasn't very comfortable about [...] me going into that lifestyle" (P5).

Other significant barriers stemmed from individuals' external contexts: from the economy (B9,10), current or future jobs (B12–14), culture (B17), infrastructure (B6,7) or the educational system (B8). Overall society and economy were perceived by many as rather negative: "I feel like there are almost two kinds of forces. The force that is your worldview or the values that drive the voluntary simplicity in a positive direction and then you also have the centre force and constraints, and there's not much you can do about this one." (P3) And: "I think we see it for what it is. That it's been designed against the simple living [...] designed to support a materialistic culture and get people more and more in debt" (P4). In support of those perspectives, Jackson [79] and Giddens [57] remind us that consumption is influenced by both a person's chosen lifestyle as well as institutions and social structures. In this context, Robinson [74] notes it is astonishing to succeed in reducing work despite a predominating structural bias to promote overwork, which gives rise to a culture of over-consuming resources and under-consuming leisure (B10,17), making it difficult for VSPs to find employment that suits one's working hours (B12) or values (B11).

4.2.4. Work as a Trigger, Enabler, and Barrier

Finally, the analysis of the VSL adoption provided a new perception on work. Within VSL literature, a consensus exists that a VSL is based on an initial reduction of income. The analysis, however, showed that work reduction is only one aspect among many: The current job can be a trigger (T10) or barrier (B13), finding new job opportunities can be an enabler (E14), but more often a new job that suits one's values is a barrier (B11). Qualifications (B14) or envisioned work hours (B12) are further barriers. Eventually, work time is reduced, and therefore this first practice change marks the starting point of the VSL Practices and Effects Model, which is explained in the next section.

4.3. VSL Practices

Existing literature [56,80,81] argues that a lifestyle is perceived as 'never finished' but a process which is complex and influenced by inconsistencies and tensions across multiple bundles of practices. VSPs often mirror such inconsistencies: they adhere to some but not all lifestyle aspects [28]. It comes as no surprise that this research revealed a diverse number of 151 practices (Appendix B).

When living a voluntary simplicity lifestyle, the first practice change often relates to the reduction of work by reducing hours or resigning [19,29,30,49], which is the first step in our VSL Practices and Effects Model (Figure 4). In the sample (Appendix D), eight individuals eventually resigned and today have new jobs, earn less money and work fewer hours. Two interviewees have new part-time jobs, and both mentioned their job is just a means to live the life they want: "my focus [in life] is outside of work" (P1). In contrast, six other interviewees became self-employed-freelancers or entrepreneurs—often because finding the envisioned job was a barrier (B11). They mentioned that their new self-employed jobs are well aligned with their values and intended work-life balance. Regarding the trade-off between work, money and time (yellow box, Figure 4), the amount of available free-time increases while the amount of available money reduces [22,23,28].

The decrease of available money affects the consumption of material things, which are either consumed less [32] or differently [27] (blue box, Figure 4). On the contrary, the increase of available free-time positively affects non-material pursuits or practices that do not require material consumption [28,54]. Through reduced or different consumption in combination with more non-material experiences, a new set of practices emerges, which signifies a unique VSL of the individual.

The so-far described sequence of practice changes is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows the first level of the final VSL Practices and Effects Model. The model's first level did not change based on further insights from interviews but is exactly the same as our initial VSL Practices and Effects Model (developed solely from existing literature). It also illustrates the four positive effects of a VSL (green box, Figure 4). However, before investigating VSL effects, we will "dive deeper" into the second level of the model, highlighted in dark grey in Figure 4. By doing so, we will show which concrete practices change as a VSL is adopted.

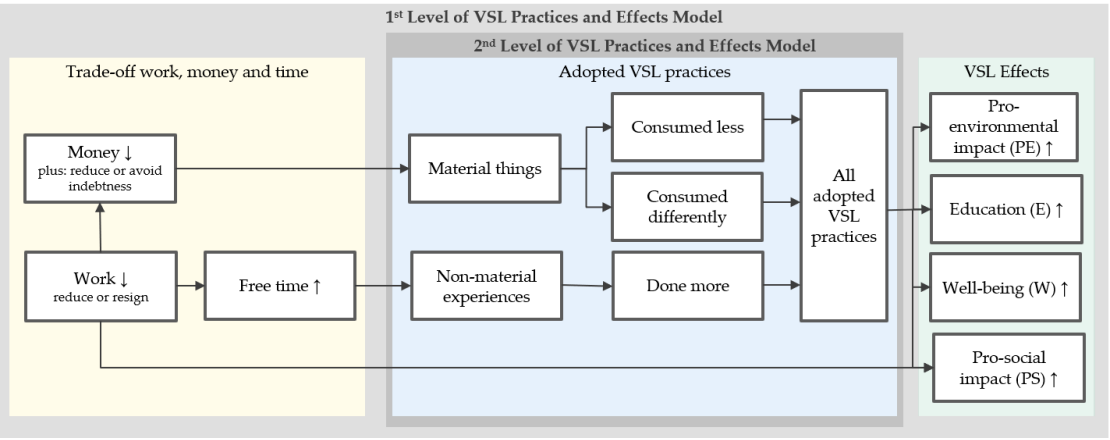

Figure 4. Final VSL Practices and Effects Model (1st and 2nd Level). Sources: based on [10,22–24,27,28,32,54].

In contrast to the first level of the model, the second level of the initial VSL Practices and Effects Model (dark grey box, Figure 4) was enriched with 66 additional practices determined from interviews. In total, 44% of the resulting final 151 practices were found in both literature and interviews, 12% came only from literature, and another 44% stemmed only from interviews. Table 3 shows a simplified version of the final model (2nd Level). The fully coded version of the final VSL Practices and Effects Model (2nd level), as well as the initial VSL Practices and Effects Model (2nd level as an integral part of the final model), are found in Appendix B.

The model's second level collates practices in five categories (materialism, basic needs, relationships, cognitive activities, and physical activities) with further 14 underlying categories, which in turn then collate the 151 practices. This categorisation developed solely based on patterns seen among the practices and is illustrated in the columns in Table 3. Within the rows, practices are attributed to either less consumption, different consumption or more experiences compared to the previous mainstream lifestyle as already illustrated in the model's first level (Figure 4). For some quadrants of the resulting final model, no practices were found while others do not require material consumption and therefore only include non-material experience practices (and therefore "not applicable" (n/a) is noted in Table 3). Each of the practices marks a change compared to the prior lifestyle and most interviewees named practice changes across the whole spectrum of categories. This is why adopting a VSL can be regarded as a profound change in one's way of living.

Table 3. Simplified 2nd Level of final Practices and Effects Model (the dark grey part of Figure 4). Sources based on: [2,24,49,54,60,75,82,83,27–30,32,44,45,48] and interviews

		5 Practice categories	1 Materialism		2 Basic needs					3 Relationships		4 Cognitive activities			5 Physical activities		
		14 sub-categories	1.1 Getting rid of things	1.2 Buying things	2.1 At home	2.2 Choosing a home	2.3 Eating	2.5 Dressing	2.6 Transportation	3.1 Family and friends	3.2 Society	4.1 Knowledge	4.2 Inner life	4.3 Arts and culture	5.1 Fitness and health	5.2 Vacation	SUM
Material things	Consumed less	151 practices	n/a	9	6	0	7	2	3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3	30
	Consumed differently		n/a	10	5	5	8	6	3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	37
Non-material experiences	Done more		6	6	5	1	6	3	7	11	5	6	4	9	10	5	84
		SUM	6	25	16	6	21	11	13	11	5	6	4	9	10	8	151

The following sections will highlight the striking findings from each of the five practice categories. Those significant findings formed the basis for our proposed final conceptual framework for detailed VSL criteria at a later stage in this study (while all findings found are shown in Appendix D only). The numbering of the practice categories (e.g., 1) and their sub-categories (e.g., 1.1) from Table 3 is used throughout the next paragraphs.

4.3.1. Materialism

Getting rid of things (1.1): Among interviewees, getting rid of things was essential as too many possessions had diminished their quality of lives, in line with the literature [29]. One interviewee stated how she got rid of 90% of her possessions. She explained donating felt like "a spiritual favour" which allowed entering the VSL "with a pure heart" (P3). Interestingly and arguably guided by the value 'universalism', no one stated having thrown things away. Instead, interviewees decluttered in a conscious manner, being aware that material things do have a value for another person and required resources to be produced in the first place. After the initial decluttering of possessions, one interviewee then established a ritual of regular decluttering (P2). The fact that initially getting rid of things took a lot of time and energy had presumably a spill-over effect on evolving VSL buying practices.

Buying things (1.2): Through their possessions, interviewees experienced feeling restricted in their freedom and use of time. Consequently, they were cautious to not fall back into the "trap of the stuff owning you rather than the other way around" (P2). Such precautionary measures involved, for example, to avoid going shopping, conscious consumption or making things oneself. Besides the focus on maintaining their level of sufficient possessions, other implications from such practices were that interviewees valued and maintained their existing possessions more and had decoupled their identity and self-worthiness from what they own.

4.3.2. Basic Needs

At home (2.1): Practices conducted at home, were talked about at length. A reason for this might be that interviewees have more time to be at home, or, possibly because shelter is an actual basic 'need' and not a 'want' [15]. Another reason might be that the place of living generally constitutes a significant part of an individuals' ecological footprint, which respondents were keen on reducing. Therefore, VSPs established practices to make their homes self-sufficient by installing natural insulation, water tanks, solar panels or outdoor ovens or by planting trees to avoid air-conditioning. Regarding household activities, four interviewees were keen on creating a zero-waste home. Some VSL practitioners established systems for simplified household processes. Also, a few interviewees got rid of their TV. The latter comes as no surprise as materialistic values guide watching random TV and are opposed to VSL values [15].

Choosing a home (2.2): Consistent with the literature [30], most interviewees did not move, a practice that distinguishes VSL from other pro-environmental lifestyles [1,36,37]. Only two interviewees moved into smaller houses in more rural areas, and only one moved into a smaller apartment. This is in line with literature stating that if VSPs move, they move into smaller houses, rural areas or cooperative or communally housing [29,30].

Eating (2.3): Regarding eating, individuals grow their own food, buy via a food cooperative or buy local, organic, Fairtrade food. Further, they reduce the consumption of meat or convenience food, cook more and treat food waste more sustainable by composting [27,29,30,82]. Such eating practices were mostly confirmed by interviewees while the most striking practice mentioned was learning how to cook, cooking more, and eating more sustainably and healthier.

Dressing (2.4): Interviewees established practices that take away their focus from regularly thinking about how to dress. The motivation behind this behaviour was again to create more focus on non-material aspects of life. They did so by, for instance, only owning black clothes, shopping only for replacements, not dressing up, having a lot of the same clothes or knowing exactly which brands to buy (e.g., high durability or ethical standards). Some established capsule wardrobes, which include only a few essential items that can then be augmented with seasonal pieces. Guided by 'universalism', the motivation behind dressing practices was also to not be complacent with the fast fashion industry and to buy consciously to only buy once.

Transportation (2.5): For transportation, VSL practitioners avoid big or new cars and instead prefer small or used ones. They walk, bike, hitchhike, use carpooling or public transport or plan to do everything in only one car trip [2,29,82]. Some interviewees owned cars. However, all of them mentioned they would like to not have cars, but insufficient public transportation in their area made this impossible. Most of them owned second-hand cars and kept them for a long time. The other remarkable finding about walking more was related to being closer to nature: "You connect with nature when you walk, you have time for meditation" (P3).

4.3.3. Relationships

Family and friends (3.1): VSPs spend more time with their family and friends than before. They often search for new peer groups that confirm their lifestyle [2,27,29]. Most interviewees indeed engaged more with their family or friends. Having more time for people, especially for their own family, was a motivational factor in adopting a VSL in the first place for two practitioners. Further, new friendships with other VSPs emerged while old ones drifted apart. One practitioner exemplifies this: "I think they just did not understand what I was trying to do in my life" (P3). Another practitioner explained similarly why former friendships dissolved: "They have chosen the money, […] the predictability, the routine and the safety […]. And you have chosen risk, and […] to make a change […] you have gone on a journey, and they have not. So, I think in that situation the relationships have broken down." (P2)

Society (3.2): VSPs often volunteer or advocate for environmental or social causes [2,27,29]. This was the case for almost all interviewed VSPs. They did so by, for example, helping to design a sustainability course, organising a sustainability festival once a year or giving workshops about self-

sufficiency skills. In addition, few made their homes regular meeting points for social gatherings in their community.

Regarding family and friends as well as society, most interviewees wanted to positively and subtly influence them through acting as a positive VSL role model. One interviewee said: "You can only provide examples or offer to help" (P1). More specifically, practitioners intended to influence through their changed communication (e.g., listening more, talking simpler or sending handwritten letters). In support of such perceived leadership attempts, Elgin [2] (p. 22) outlines VSPs decide to not "wait for leadership from others; instead, they empower themselves to invent alternative approaches to living."

Interviewees' engagement with other people stands in contrast to existing literature claiming VSPs regard themselves as part of a global grassroots movement [28]. In fact, only two interviewees mentioned seeing a movement—in one case, a "minimalism and simple living movement" (P6—without a strong sense of being an active part of it.

A last noteworthy finding was choosing consciously with whom to do what: "I'm quite good [now] at saying no that's not for me" (P1). The underlying motivation was the need for "meaningful conversations" (P3) guided by 'benevolence' as well as the awareness that humans are social beings, influencing each other and affecting each other's development. Such profound reflections were likely guided by their self-directed way of thinking and acting.

4.3.4. Cognitive Activities

Throughout all three practice categories of this category, practitioners took classes, read more books or started studying again [44,48,49]. The following highlights further striking findings for each one.

New knowledge (4.1): Interviewees gained new knowledge in philosophy, psychology, science, sustainability, the economic system, sufficiency skills, education or simple living. When looking at those topics, it comes as no surprise that individuals showed profound knowledge about the complexity and systemic interconnections between economy, environment, and society within our current global system as mentioned earlier already.

Inner life (4.2): When exploring their inner life, VSL practitioners started meditation, journaling or yoga, which arguably contributed to them becoming more mindful and accepting.

Arts and culture (4.3): Examples for exploring arts and culture are that one interviewee started acting in theatre, and two started to paint. Others—according to the literature—make crafts, listen to music, go to museums, watch consciously-chosen movies but avoid watching TV randomly [2,28,54].

4.3.5. Physical Activities

Fitness and health (5.1): In their increased free-time interviewees improved their fitness and health, by starting to do gardening, running, biking, yoga or generally spend more time in nature by going for walks or hiking. According to existing literature, VSPs further adopt holistic household practices and quit smoking [2,27].

Vacation (5.2): VSL practitioners avoid commercial vacations and prefer to plan individual trips by going camping, backpacking or visiting friends [2,48,75]. The same was true for interviewees who preferred individual or simple vacations such as backpacking or camping. One interviewee (P1) talked about gathering new VSL ideas by visiting community gardens in other countries. Another one (P4) mentioned they could go for spontaneous camping trips as preparing for it had become easier due to fewer possessions.

4.4. VSL Effects

The four effects of the VSL practices were already evident from the literature, and all were also confirmed by our research: increased education [2], increased wellbeing [19], pro-social [28] and pro-environmental impacts [60]. No other effects were found besides these through our research. Appendix B shows how the four effects relate to the 14 sub-practice categories. In the following, each

effect is explained and striking findings are highlighted. As for the other results, such striking findings will become an integral part of the final conceptual framework for detailed VSL criteria.

4.4.1. Wellbeing

Wellbeing increases due to an increase in vitality, authenticity and autonomy while depression and anxiety decrease [15]. Consequently, rising materialism does not hold what it promises (increased wellbeing and life satisfaction), but the accumulation of money, possessions, and status often leads to the contrary. Therefore the political and societal consensus that consumption is a worthy life goal is to be questioned as it affects people (and the planet) negatively [3,9,10,15,51]. In our interviews, practices contributing to the increase in wellbeing were found across all categories (underpinned by all VSL values). Aspects increasing interviewees' wellbeing were: less anxiety, more life satisfaction, more control about life, more slowness, more balance, more freedom to do what one loves, owning less, improved mental and physical health, improved financial situations and voluntary hardship to fix or create things themselves.

4.4.2. Education

Education increases as VSPs seek continuous learning and autonomy [2,27,44]. For interviewees, education has increased primarily through practices of gaining new knowledge, learning about oneself (e.g., sports, meditation) or through self-sufficiency skills (e.g., cooking, construction or maintenance work, gardening, repairing or making things, or permaculture). Also, interviewees increased the education of others through their skills (gardening or football coaching), their knowledge (giving talks, developing a masters course, volunteering), or through acting as a role model (going to the park with children to pick up trash). The values guiding practices which lead to increased education are primarily 'stimulation' and 'self-direction', but also 'benevolence' and 'universalism' when practitioners engage in educating others.

4.4.3. Pro-Social Effects

Pro-social impacts occur as individuals contribute directly or indirectly to society [2,27,28]: Indirectly, equality increases through two causes: First, because less and different consumption reduces status competition which in turn increases equality [8]. Second, equality increases due to reduced working hours which lead to a redistribution of work and therefore, to a redistribution of wealth [28]. However, such effects were not mentioned by any interviewee. Reasons are likely to be that the concept of relative national inequality requires a rather macroeconomic perspective. Even though some interviewees demonstrated being able to take such a perspective, making this connection is maybe too far-fetched.

Direct pro-social impacts, which individuals were aware of, stem primarily from the practice category 'relationships', but practices of other categories such as buying local, donating or organising workshops, contributed as well. Interviewees stated that their impact on building supportive communities had increased, an aspect that Jackson [79] claims sustainable consumption has to be about, among others. Interviewees further explained this was not only due to more free-time, but also as their level of influence increased because they became less anxious and friendlier. The underlying values of the pro-social effects are mostly 'benevolence' and 'universalism'.

4.4.4. Pro-Environmental Impacts

Pro-environmental impacts occur through the reduction of consumption [2,60], and the underlying intrinsic value is mainly 'universalism'. The pro-environmental impact is affected by any practices where material things are consumed less or differently. For example, one interviewee was able to quantify her family's weekly trash and how it reduced. Another stated: "I've got a fairly substantial house so trying to reduce my carbon footprint on the world by sharing that house with others" (P1) and two others stated it is evident that the less they consume, the less negative environmental impact there is. Also, VSPs affect pro-environmental impact as they influence their

children or others through being a positive example: "[Teaching my friends how to preserve food] reduces their consumption and helps them live a healthier lifestyle. It's been a really fun experience to have these skills that I can share with other people" (P6).

5. Discussion

We propose the final conceptual framework for detailed VSL criteria — still missing in academic literature — in Figure 5, which summarizes the main aspects of this study [19]. It builds upon the developed initial conceptual framework in Figure 1 and is enriched with significant findings. Further, the figure includes some of the tables and figures presented in this study to illustrate how all our final results have led and relate to the proposed final conceptual framework.

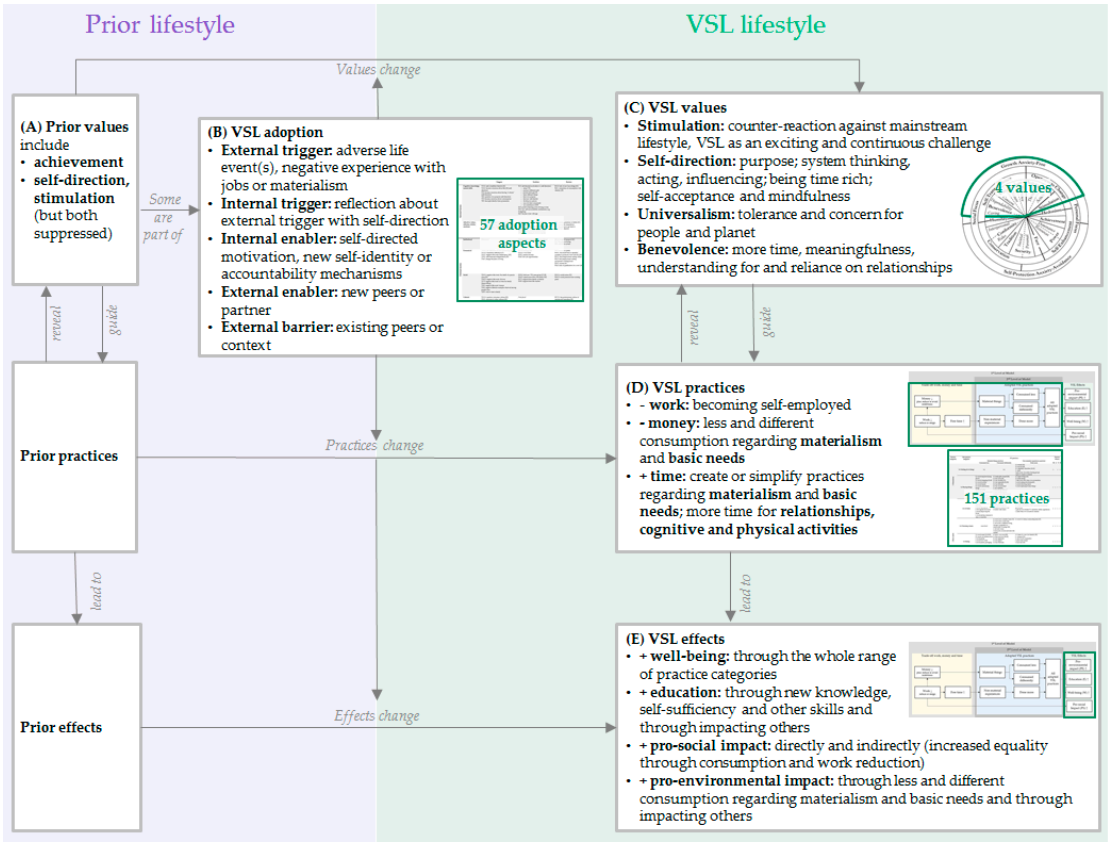

Figure 5. Final conceptual framework for detailed VSL criteria from most significant aspects of values, adoption, practices, and effects. Developed in this research.

What is evident from these proposed detailed VSL criteria is that it entails more than merely a voluntary reduction of income and consumption in exchange for more free time (which has been the consensus on VSL among scholars). To pinpoint the VSL in more detail is, in fact, more complicated, because multiple aspects co-exist. The following explains the illustrated proposed VSL criteria, referring to parts of the final conceptual framework in brackets, e.g., (A):

- Values: The final VSL values 'self-direction' and 'stimulation' were already grounded in the psyche of interviewees (A), but were likely suppressed and probably became unsuppressed during the VSL adoption process (B). Also, the values 'benevolence' and 'universalism' became a new part of the VSL value set (C).
- Adoption: Adverse life events followed by a self-directed reflection of such events triggered the VSL adoption process (B). Afterwards, enablers were key to pursue VSL adoption: changes in self-identity, self-directed motivation, new accountability mechanisms and support from

partners or new peers. Encountered barriers hindering VSL adoption stemmed mostly from the external contexts. No significant internal barriers were determined.

- Practices: Practices change from prior to VSL practices (D). The results show the interconnected trade-offs between work, money and time, affecting an individuals' set of VSL practices. Further, most VSPs became self-employed; money is spent differently in relation to material things and basic needs, and time is spent to create or simplify practices, requiring resources. Finally, more time is spent on relationships, cognitive and physical activities.
- Effects: Effects change from prior to VSL effects (E). All practice categories lead to increased personal wellbeing, while new knowledge and skills increased education. Through their practices VSPs have direct and indirect pro-social effects and pro-environmental impacts through consuming less or differently.

Our proposed conceptual framework seeks to address the research gap of missing detailed VSL criteria. It is rigorously grounded in the existing literature and further confirmed and enriched through the interviews conducted. The proposed perspective within the framework, based on both secondary and primary data, differentiates between the prior and the VSL lifestyle as well as between values, adoption, practices, and effects. Those perspectives are unique and new contributions to the VSL literature as well as for lifestyle literature in general.

This study contributes with (1) more detailed insights into the value changes during the lifestyle adoption of a voluntary simplicity lifestyle (VSL), (2) detailed perspectives on significant aspects in VSL adoption and how they tend to happen in a sequence and (3) insight into how consumption reduces or changes and how free-time is spent when adopting a VSL. A resulting final conceptual framework for detailed VSL criteria, such as the one proposed in this study, is valuable to characterise the VSL lifestyle and differentiate it from similar types of lifestyles. Also, the VSL criteria could be a good starting point for a systematic segmentation into different types of VSL.

6. Conclusions

This research provides new perspectives on VSL through the creation of a conceptual framework for detailed VSL criteria, building on existing literature and interviews with VSL practitioners. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first proposal of detailed VSL criteria, which could be a departure point for further research.

For further research, both our method and final conceptual framework could be applied to investigate VSPs to validate and enrich our findings. Another future research opportunity would be to develop a scale from our work and test it using quantitative methods. A comparative study between people who succeeded in VSL adoption versus those who failed would also shed more light on the lifestyle. Other methods could be observations of VSPs over more extended periods of time or the use a case study method which includes partners, children, friends and other people from the societal context of VSPs and which would hence reduce the inherent subjectivity.

This research posed some limitations typical of qualitative studies. It is limited due to the method of interviews, which leads to the inherent subjectivity of the collected data. For instance, it is known that self-reported practices do not always equal actual practices, but rather the perceptions and beliefs about one's practices [84]. Further, the participants' willingness to share personal information might have been limited, or the positive VSL aspects of their lifestyle were over-emphasized. Regarding the latter, however, we did not get such an impression and intended to mitigate this by asking neutral questions. Finally, this research is limited due to its small sample size. Yet, theoretical saturation was reached already with such a small sample.

Finally, the research also contributes to future practices. For individuals who are already living a VSL or are motivated to change towards one, this research provides guidance on how to do so. For business, this research sheds light on a potential group of new customers focused on sufficiency. For policymakers, this research showed which external barriers (existing economic and societal structures [18,51,85], consumerist cultures, and materialistic values [15]) would need to be overcome to enable a VSL lifestyle. Consequently, living simpler, more sustainable and more satisfying lives by many could become a significant contributor to building a sufficiency-based society [86].

To conclude, this study explored the VSL and reaffirmed its relevance for voluntary adoption of more sustainable consumption patterns. Taken together, the results provide clarifying insights through detailed VSL criteria, and explored the possibilities of a VSL. The study reaffirmed the VSL's potential for contributing to a change towards more sustainable consumption patterns as it is adopted voluntarily and creates positive effects for not only the planet but also for society and the individual.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Final (and initial) VSL Adoption Model

The final VSL Adoption Model is illustrated in the table below with all findings. The 57 factors influencing adoption were found in both literature and interviews (LI, 37%), only in literature (L, 17%), or only in interviews (I, 46%). The initial VSL Adoption Model is an integral part of the final model and consists of all aspects already found in literature (LI or L within the table). In addition, all aspects have a signifying number and letter depending on whether they belong to triggers (T#), enablers (E#) or barriers (B#). Those signifying numbers are referred to within this study (in Section 4.2). Finally, if values guiding VSPs were clearly standing behind any of the aspects found, then the respective value is mentioned in the model in brackets (e.g., for T2 (self-direction)

Table A. Final (and initial) VSL Adoption Model

		Triggers	Enablers	Barriers
Internal factors	**Cognitive: attitudes, knowledge, mental skills**	T1/LI: seek a healthier lifestyle [46] T2/LI: become conscious about life [29] (self-direction) T3/I: become conscious about having "a choice" (self-direction) T4/I: question own purpose (self-direction) T5/I: become conscious about consumption T6/I: decouple identity from possessions	E1/I: self-directed motivation to: (self-direction) • adopt VSL • pursue a different path • pursue inner growth • learn different things • find own purpose • find new self-identity • develop as a person • use own time consciously • not contribute to GDP E2/I: positive learning cycle of living on less E3/I: new self-accountability mechanisms (e.g., budgeting) E4/I: become wiser with age	B1/LI: lack of new knowledge [30] B2/L: connection of consumption with identity [29]
	Affective: attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions	T7/I: experience an emotional breakdown T8/I: experience an emotional counter-reaction against mainstream lifestyles (stimulation) T9/L: have a spiritual experience [46]	E5/LI: concern for the environment [46] (universalism) E6/LI: seek to align practices with values [29] E7/LI: profound value transformation [29] E8/LI: seek non-material pursuits [2,24] E9/I: regain a feeling of control over life	B3/L: existing practices or habits [30] B4/L: consumer temptations [30] B5/I: temptation to go back to mainstream lifestyle

External factors	**Institutional**	None found	E10/LI: regard simple practices as political statements [29,59]	B6/LI: suitable transport [30] B7/I: the place of living B8/I: education system
	Economical	T10/LI: job with stress or lack of meaning [29] T11/LI: experience affluence [27] T12/L: negative life event (bankruptcy) [46] T13/L: seek financial independence [24] T14/I: change the place of living	E11/LI: savings [29] E12/LI: own home [29] E13/L: passive income [29] E14/I: new job opportunities	B9/I: economic system B10/L: structural bias in capitalist societies to promote overwork [30] [74] B11/L: find employment suiting values [30] [74] B12/I: find employment suiting envisioned working hours B13/I: current job B14/I: lack of qualification for a new job
	Social	T15/LI: negative life event: the death of a person close [46] T16/LI: negative life event: divorce [46] T17/I: negative life event: no time for family (benevolence) T18/I: negative life event: trauma T19/I: negative lifestyle examples observed among people close T20/I: wish to start a family	E15/LI: find new VSL peer group [27,29] E16/LI: spend more time with family [46] E17/I: support from family or friends E18/I: support from life coaches	B15/LI: social norms [49] B16/LI: social pressure from existing peers [49]
	Cultural	T21/LI: question consumer culture [46] T22/L: exposure to other cultures [46]	None found	B17/LI: the predominant culture of earning and spending [42]
	Legend:	LI: literature and interviews, L: literature only, I: interviews only T1: Trigger Number 1, E1: Enabler Number 1, B1: Barrier Number 1		

Appendix B. Final (and initial) VSL Practices and Effects Model (2nd Level)

The final VSL Practices and Effects Model (2nd Level), is illustrated in the table below with all findings. The 151 practices were found in both literature and interviews (LI), only in literature (L), or only in interviews (I). The initial VSL Practices and Effects Model (2nd Level) is an integral part of the final model and consists of all practices already found in literature (LI or L within the table). The model further attributes the practice categories to the four positive

effects of pro-environmental impact (PE), education (E), wellbeing (W) or pro-social impact (PS). If one practice has any of the four positive effects, then a tick-mark in the respective column is made.

Table B. Final (and initial) VSL Practices and Effects Model (2nd Level)

Practice categories	Sub-practice categories	151 Practices			Practice Effects			
		Material Things Practices		Non-Material Experiences Practices				
		Consumed Less	Consumed Differently	Done More	PE	E	W	PS
1 Materialism	1.1 Getting rid of things	n/a	n/a	LI: donate [32] LI: recycle [27] LI: (regularly) declutter [2,30] L: resell [2,30] I: give away via online sharing groups I: give to charity or friends	x		x	x
	1.2 Buying things	LI: avoid impulse buying [32,45] LI: avoid shopping [2,29] LI: avoid luxuries [2,29] LI: avoid brands [2,29] LI: avoid unnecessary things [2,29] LI: avoid clutter [2,29] LI: boycott or vote through buying [2,29] I: avoid big business I: avoid online shopping	LI: make gifts oneself [82] LI: buy local [27] LI: buy durable [30] LI: buy reparable [2,82] LI: buy ethically [2,82] LI: buy second-hand [2,82] L: buy aesthetic [2,82] L: buy energy efficient [2,82] L: buy functional [30] I: receive via online sharing groups	LI: repair things [32] LI: make things [32] I: take stock and value own possessions I: avoid seeing advertisements I: avoid following trends I: avoid replacing broken things	x	x	x	x
2 Basic needs	2.1 At home	LI: reduce household energy [30] I: avoid chemicals for cleaning I: avoid decorations I: downgrade the house I: avoid improving the house I: avoid paying someone to clean or maintain	LI: buy second-hand furniture [82] LI: buy or produce renewable energy [30] LI: install insulation [30] I: install an outdoor oven I: install water tanks	LI: adopt sustainable household practices (e.g., recycle, avoid waste) [2] LI: (learn) maintenance work [2] LI: (learn) self-reliance skills (carpentry, plumbing, gardening) [2] I: get rid of or donate TV, furniture, dishes, appliances I: make their own household cleaners	x	x	x	x

	2.2 Choosing a home	*none found*	LI: move into a smaller home [30] LI: move into a rural area [30] L: move into a different living concept (cooperative or communally housing) [29] I: sub-rent rooms I: move into a house and renovate oneself	LI: move to reduce commuting time [24]	x	x	x	x
	2.3 Eating	LI: avoid meat [2,29,82] LI: avoid convenience food [2,29,82] I: avoid gluten I: avoid food waste I: avoid plastic packaging I: avoid eating out I: avoid take away food	LI: grow own food [82] LI: eat local food [27,29] LI: eat vegetarian [27,29] LI: eat organic [27,29] LI: buy Fairtrade [27,29] I: eat healthier I: buy in bulk I: eat out at simpler places	LI: (learn to) cook (for friends) [29] L: compost [30] L: join a food cooperative [30] I: plan meals ahead I: hunt and fish I: make homemade preserves	x	x	x	x
	2.4 Dressing	LI: avoid new clothes [83] I: avoid fast fashion	LI: buy second-hand [29,30] LI: buy ethical [32] I: buy natural fibres I: buy local I: avoid dressing up (incl. jewellery, make-up) I: simplify wardrobe	LI: wear clothes longer [2] LI: repair torn clothes [30] L: make clothes oneself	x	x	x	x
	2.5 Transportation	LI: avoid new cars [29] LI: avoid big cars [29] I: avoid using own car	L: buy used cars [2,29] L: buy smaller cars [2,29] I: buy fuel-efficient cars	LI: walk [82] LI: bike [82] LI: use public transport [2,30] LI: plan to do everything in one car trip [2,30] L: use carpooling [2,30] L: hitchhike [2,30] I: keep cars for long	x		x	x
3 Relationships	**3.1 Family and friends**	n/a	n/a	LI: spend more time with family and friends [2]			x	x

				I: establish new family rituals I: increase the quality of relationships LI: find a new peer group [2,27,29,30,82] I: reconnect with old friends or neighbours I: stop being friends with former work colleagues I: establish slower and simplified communication I: do movie nights I: do game nights I: make non-material gifts I: act as a role model				
	3.2 Society	n/a	n/a	LI: advocate or volunteer for social causes [2,27,29] LI: advocate or volunteer for environmental causes [2,27,29] I: organise social gatherings at own home I: organise workshops or classes I: avoid activities that cost money	x	x	x	x
4 Cognitive activities	**4.1 Knowledge**	n/a	n/a	LI: take classes or workshops [44] LI: study [48,49] LI: read books [32] LI: borrow books [32] I: avoid buying books I: watch documentaries		x	x	
	4.2 Inner life	n/a	n/a	L: become religious [2,60] I: journal I: set new "mind rules" for oneself I: meditate		x	x	
	4.3 Arts and culture	n/a	n/a	LI: make crafts [2] LI: listen to music [28,54] LI: avoid watching TV [28,54] L: go to museums [28,54]		x	x	

				L: read books [28,54] L: watch classical movies [28,54] I: paint art I: learn instruments I: act in theatre				
5 Physical activities	**5.1 Fitness and health**	n/a	n/a	LI: do yoga [2,29,87] LI: do gardening [2,29,87] LI: go running [2,29,87] LI: go biking [2,29,87] LI: spend time in nature (e.g., walk the dog, hiking) [2,29,87] L: adopt holistic healthcare practices [2,27] L: quit smoking [2] I: do workouts I: have active days I: play with pets	x	x		
	5.2 Vacation	LI: avoid commercial vacation [2] I: avoid flying I: avoid expensive vacations	none found	LI: camping [2] L: visit friends [75] L: go backpacking [48] I: learn about VSL in other countries I: go into nature during vacation	x	x	x	x

Legend: LI: literature and interviews, L: literature only, I: interviews only. PE: pro-environmental impact, E: education, W: wellbeing, PS: pro-social impact. n/a: not applicable.

Appendix C. Interview questionnaire

Table C. Interview questionnaire

#	Purpose	Question
1	Introduction	Can you tell me about yourself?
2		Can you outline your "journey" towards your current lifestyle in a few sentences?
3	Verify initial VSL Practices and Effects Model (1st level)	The next few questions ask about work, free -time and spending of money: To what extent did you reduce your time spent working?
4		How did you reduce your time spent working?
5		How did the reduction of work affect how you spend your free time?
6		To what extent did the reduction of work affect your spending of money?

7		How did the reduction of work affect your spending of money?
8		How did it affect your spending of money on material things vs. non-material experiences?
9	Verify initial VSL Practices and Effects Model (2nd level)	The next questions ask about daily or regular activities and how those have changed compared to how you lived before. Which significant changes come to your mind where you now do more, different things or less compared to your previous lifestyle?
10		With regards to eating, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
11		With regards to dressing, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
12		With regards to buying & getting rid of things, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
13		With regards to going on vacation, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
14		With regards to moving along in daily life, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
15		With regards to choosing a home, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
16		With regards to activities at home (including household activities), can you describe what you do more, different or less?
17		With regards to exploring new knowledge, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
18		With regards to exploring your inner life, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
19		With regards to exploring arts and culture, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
20		With regards to your fitness and health, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
21		With regards to engaging with your family and friends, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
22		With regards to engaging with or for the broader society, can you describe what you do more, different or less?
23		Are there any other aspects in life, which we have not talked about, where you do things more, different or less and which also characterize your current lifestyle?
24	Verify initial VSL Practices and Effects Model (Effects)	The next three questions ask about the overall effects of your new lifestyle: How did this lifestyle change in total effect yourself?
25		How did your lifestyle change affect society?
26		How did your lifestyle change affect the environment?
27	Verify initial VSL values	The next four questions ask about your values: What is important in life to you?
28		How this differs from what used to be important in life to you?
29		What motivates you to live the way you do?
30		Did you set yourself any life principles that guide your daily life? Which ones?
31	Verify initial VSL Adoption Model	The next three questions ask about how your lifestyle change happened: Which factors triggered your lifestyle change?
32		Which factors enabled you to change your lifestyle?
33		Which factors hindered you during the time when you changed your lifestyle?
34	Demographics	The next few questions regard your personal background again: Can you tell me about your education?

35		What is your current living situation?
36		Can you tell me about your age?
37		Can you tell me about your family status?
38	Final remarks	And last: Do you have any closing thoughts or comments that you would like to make?

Appendix D. Data Sample

Two interviews were excluded: P10 had voluntarily reduced her income, but neither reduced consumption nor gave the notion of changed life priorities. P11 was excluded as her income reduction was involuntarily due to retirement. Two other interviewees were analysed with less intensity (fully coded, but used less to derive main conclusions): P8 reduced income and consumption, but as he became an entrepreneur, his free-time did not increase. P9 had moved abroad and had initial difficulties in finding a job. It was during this time when she adopted VSL practices. Finally, P3 did not reduce her income but consciously stayed below her earning capacity by choosing to do her PhD instead of higher-paying job opportunities. Her interview remained entirely part of the analysis.

Table D. Data Sample

Respondent number	**Demographics**										**Sampling criteria**				
	Sex	**Age**	**Years since VSL adoption**	**Job prior**	**Job afterwards**	**Place of living**	**Relationship status**	**Kids**	**Education**	**Living status**	**1: Income ↓**	**2: Consumption ↓**	**3: Time ↑**	**4: Life priority shift**	**In sum: Included?**
P1	F	58	13-18	Full-time team lead, information management company	Bookshop owner, later social carer	Australia	Divorced and relationship	1	Bachelor's in information management	house, suburb					
P2	M	45	4	Full-time purchaser in MNC	Sustainability schoolteacher, entrepreneur, part-time student	Ireland	married	3	Master's environmental science, sustainability	house, village					
P3	F	29	7	Student	PhD student researching the de-growth economy	UK	relationship	0	Degrees in economics, marketing	flat, small city					

P4	F	40	5	Full-time office manager	Simple living coach, real estate restaurateur	USA (Ohio)	married	6	Bachelor English literature	house, countryside
P5	F	26	5	Full-time NGO employee	Freelancer for environmental education and personal development	India	relationship	0	Degrees in economics, education	flat, city
P6	F	29	4	Full-time executive assistant	Freelancer for corporate safety	USA (Alaska)	married	2	Business management	house, village
P7	M	55	10	Full-time electrical engineer	VSL writer, speaker, consultant, activist	USA (New York)	single	1	PhD electrical engineering	flat, city
P8	M	55	16	Full-time software engineer	Entrepreneur for technical sustainability and renewable energy	UK	married	2	Degrees in chemistry, environmental decision making	house, small city
P9	F	38	1.5	PhD student biological science	voluntary freelancer for zero-waste, searching for a job	France	married	0	PhD biological science; degrees in biotechnology, chemistry	flat, city
P10	F	31	n/a	Full-time psychotherapist	Part-time psychotherapist	Germany	relationship	0	Master psychology	flat, city
P11	F	60	n/a	Full-time in US Air Force	Environmental activist	USA (Florida)	divorced	2	High school	flat, city

Legend for colour code:

Sampling criteria 1-4:
light green: sampling criteria fulfilled
yellow: sampling criteria not completely fulfilled
pink: sampling criteria not fulfilled

Sampling criteria in sum:
dark green: interviewee completely included in the study
medium green: interviewee included in the study but analysed with less intensity (compared to the fully included interviewees) because one of the four sampling criteria was not fulfilled
dark pink: interviewee excluded from the study because more than one sampling criteria was not fulfilled

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